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ABSTRACT

To know the culture of a nation one must try to understand the emotional side of a people's character. In considering Russian culture, a study of politics, economics, and geography is insufficient for even beginning to understand the subtleties of the national character. Despite 60 years of Soviet regime, traditional Russian values persist and are still recognizable in the love of nature, love of tradition, and love of family, particularly children. Even a brief study of Russian literature suggests a reverence for childhood. In actual life this feeling is manifested in the loving treatment of children by Russian families. Many Russian cultural traits remain constant, despite drastic changes in their lifestyle and environment during the past 150 years. Currently, the fear of a possible war pervades the lives of modern Russians, including the children. Their fears are reinforced by what they are taught in school and other government educational programs. (APG)

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Russian Children: As seen in Literature and Real Life

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Russian Children: As Seen in Literature and Real Life

Introduction

It is my belief that in order to understand the culture of a nation you must try to understand the emotional side. Especially in considering Russian culture a study of politics, economics, and geography is insufficient to reveal the subleties of the national character. In spite of sixty years of the Soviet regime, traditional Russian values are still present and recognizable in love of nature, love of tradition and love of family, particularly children.

Russian Childhood

The memories of childhood are hoarded and cherished. Tolstoy said. "Those memories refresh and elevate the soul and are a source of enjoyment all of our lives." Writings of Tolstoy and Gorky give portraits of the way many Russian children of their day lived and thought. An excerpt from Tolstoy's Childhood (1830) reads:

> ...I go upstairs in my little quilted dressing gown stand before the ikons, and what a wonderful feeling I have as I say: 'O Lord, bless papa and mama.' Repeating the prayers which my baby lips had first lisped after my beloved mother, the love of her and the love of God in some strange fashion mingled into one feeling. After saying the prayers...my heart would feel all light, buoyant and happy. Dreams would follow in quick succession (p. 54).

Tolstoy was a member of the Russian nobility of the 19th century whose class was dominated by the cultural values of the old regime in France. However, his emotions parallel those of Gorky, the son of a Novgorod carpenter, who lived thirty years later. In his autobiography, My Childhood, Gorky expresses a similar feeling of love, warmth, and security in describing early memories:

> Night came, and with it there came into one's heart something vigorous and fresh, like the loving caress of a mother; the quiet softness smoothed one's heart with its warm, rough hands, and all the bitterness, the fine dust of the day---was washed away.....It grows darker and quieter every moment (pp. 320-321).

The peace of early childhood faded when Gorky's mother made a disastrous second marriage to a gambler and wife-beater. The family, like many farm families of the 1860's, moved to Moscow hoping to find employment for the step-father. There they were reduced to poverty. Of the tenth year of his life Gorky wrote:

> As I remember these oppressive horrors of our wild Russian life, I ask myself often whether it is worthwhile to speak of them. And then, with restored confidence, I answer myself---"It is worth while because it is actual, vile fact, which has not died out even in these days---a fact that must be traced to its origin, and pulled out by the root from the memories, the souls of the people, and from our narrow sordid lives" (p. 346).

The paradox is that Gorky felt impelled to remember the horrors of his childhood as well as the beauty of it. He thought that by describing the horrors in his writing he could inspire all Russians to look forward to regeneration, to a time when they would live peacefully and humanly (p. 346). Perhaps those later childhood experiences were the seed that grew into revolutionary activity of his later life.

By 1905 Gorky was a leading literary figure in Russia. He also wrote for <u>New Life</u>, the legal Bolshevik newspaper through which Lenin

(in exile) directed the policies of the Soviets. Popularity of the newspaper was due to the literary talents and financial assistance that Gorky enlisted. He was a radical but hobnobbed with millionaires and grand dukes, subsidizing the Bolsheviks both out of his own pocket and those of the revolutionary minded capitalists (Ulam pp. 231-232).

Gorky's My Childhood is of further interest, in that it also gives us the ambiance of Russia in the time of Lenin's childhood. Very little is known of this period in Lenin's life, although there is said to be much unreleased information. We do know that Lenin's family had a tradition of noblesse oblige. He was the middle child, one with a great need to excell; he overworked his notes in school and won all the gold medals. His sister, Maria, said of him, 'he had an early capacity for systematic work, also complete concentration.' He mastered his lessons with disconcerting thoroughness' (Shub p. 34). Bolshevism, Lenin's theory of communism, changed Russia. Hence, the childhood of Lenin is of interest because the forces that shaped the man shaped Russian political (Soviet) thought.

Political and Economic Realities

Lenin spent most of his life in exile working out his theory of communism, Bolshevism (later to win control of the Soviet Party). By 1923, he saw his theory become a reality. However, in practice it didn't work, even after he made many quick modifications. Lenin said, "The Russian proletariat (working class people) are not at this time advanced enough to accept the responsibilities communism requires," (Daniels pp. 230-233). Then all freedom was lost. The communist

government became a dictatorship in order to retain control.

When Lenin died in 1925, Stalin seized control and proclaimed himself leader, made a demi-god of Lenin saying only he could carry out Lenin's plans for the perfect society. In order to remain in power Stalin murdered thousands of fellow Russians suspected of not being sympathetic to the communist cause and sent others to hard labor camps. These purges were so shocking and horrible that they are a forbidden subject in the Soviet Union today, officially ignored by the communist party (Kennan p. 56). Denial of memory is part of the "siege mentality of the Soviet regime which sees "itself endowed with unique insight, wisdom, and nobility of purpose standing out bravely against misguided and dangerous forces." It's conspiritorial in nature, "suspicious of everyone and everything foreign and obscessed with secrecy and internal security" (Kennan pp. 60-61). There's no freedom of speech, press or freedom to travel outside the Soviet Union. Secrecy, suspicion and lack of freedom, beyond doubt, affect Russian children's attitudes toward themselves and others.

Economic changes occurred concurrently with political ones in Russia. Changes in environment usually cause changes in people. There have been enormous changes in Russia since W.W.II, one change being that children see parents less as role models. This situation came about as a result of the war (one out of three men were killed). Many women who had no chance of finding husbands gave birth to illegitimate children (Kerblay p. 26). Most of the post-war generation of Russians grew up without fathers. Mothers became the sole breadwinners of families and other adults stepped into paternal roles. These illegitimate children were not looked down on, and they grew

up with most of the traditional values of their mothers and grandparents.

During the Stalinist years Russia changed from an agrarian society to an urban one. Urbanization took place in Russia in less than 30 years: in 1928 80% was rural and 20% was urban; by 1956 50% was rural and 50% was urban. The change was involuntary: the Soviet government shifted masses of peasants from the villages and directed them to industrial labor (Deutscher pp. 41-43) in the cities. Russians today are still emotionally attached to the countryside, escaping there whenever possible.

Education and Training of Russian Children

Russian children are given considerably more physical contact -----hugging, kissing and cuddling-than American children. A distinctive feature of 'Russian upbringing is the readiness of other persons besides the child's own mother to step into a maternal role' (Bronfenbrenner pp. 6-7). Shipler sees the Russian child's environment as a very restrictive one in which parents and grandparents intervene, constantly in their play, rarely leaving them to skin knees, get dirty or to play quietly alone (p. 54).

From early childhood the Russian child becomes accustomed to obeying adults by compulsively reacting to their demands. Punishment for disobedience is deprivation of adult companionship in an enjoyable activity (Bronfenbrenner p. 13). These practices are a preparation of life in Soviet society 'where serious deviance would also be punished by the withdrawl of the affection and protection of the motherland' (Shipler p. 71). The government is vitally interested in shaping young minds into accepted patterns; ranking Soviet

officials continuously make sanctimonious pronouncements on the moral and political obligations of teachers, toy manufacturers, movie producers, and story writers.

Today Russia's educational system is much like 19th century education in the United States; much stress is placed upon memorization and drill work. This method produces technically proficient linguists, dancers and musicians, but creativity is stifled. (That's why many creative artists and professionals flee to the west.) The Soviets use for their own purposes an old Russian saying, "Repetition is the mother of knowledge." Consequently Russian children follow instructions exquisitely, but fail in problem solving situations (Shipler pp. 67-69).

During the 1960's Kornei Chukovsky, one of the leading educators of Russian children wrote much about the importance of language development and creativity of young children. Chukovsky wrote eloquently to protest when the Soviet Committee on Children's Literature attacked fairy tales and fantasy with leftist slogans. These fairy tales had been passed down to Russian children for centuries (Chukovsky pp. 130-139).

By the 1980's Chukovsky's influence has faded. Shipler writes: Traditional fairy tales are being rewritten to conform with the appropriate communist mold, retaining the author's name, and the title but little else. Dialogue is heavy on how good it is to be part of a group. The stories place emphasis on overt propriety (pp. 77-78).

Russian Children in Literature

Pushkin didn't believe that literature should serve moral or

didactic ends (Richards p. xxix). His writing, whether in poetry or prose, showed a classical sense of proportion and harmony. His masterpiece, Eugene Onegin describes the heroine, Tatyana as a child, in verse:

II.25 Tatyana, then... And I would mention
That no bright eyes, no rosy skin
Were hers to rouse attention
Such as her sister's looks would sin.
Untamed to wistful silence given,
Shy as a doe to hunters driven,
She seemed not born to them but found---
A stranger in the family round.
She's never learned to charm or soften
Her parents in a wheedling way;
A child herself, in children's play
She seldom wishes to join, and often
By her own window, lost in thought. (p. 49)

These touchingly poetic lines written in 1823 show us a child of atypical traits. This poetry is timeless; in that it could be written about a child of any age. Pushkin arouses in the reader an admiration for such off beat children.

Children of the mobile society of our 1980's, whose parents are often divorced, see in Seryozha, Anna Karenina's 9 year old son, a boy emotionally much like themselves. Tolstoy wrote the following lines:

"...even after he had been told that she was dead, he kept looking out for her during his walks. Every plump, graceful woman with dark hair was his mother. At the sight of such a woman his heart was filled with such tenderness that his breath failed him and tears started to his eyes."

"Later on when he accidentally found out from his old nurse that his mother was not dead and his father and Lydia Ivanova explained to him that she was dead to him because she was not a good woman (this he simply refused to believe because he loved her), he went on waiting for her in the same way. That day there had seen a lady in the Summer Gardens with a lilac veil whom he watched with a sinking heart, wondering if it was her as she came toward him." (pp. 525-526)

Cultural values predominate those lines. Divorce is so socially unacceptable that the father wishes his child to believe the mother is dead. The name, Lydia Ivanova, and the setting, The Summer Gardens; are uniquely Russian. Those gardens date back to Peter the Great who built them for the enjoyment of the citizens of St. Petersberg.

Fairy tales, such as, "The Snow Maiden" by Alexander Afanasev contain the very essence of Old Russia: long snowy winters, little wooden huts in dense forests and deeply religious peasants:

They began to roll snowballs together, and in a short while they had made a "snegurochka," a snow maiden, so beautiful that no pen could describe her. The old man and the old woman gazed at her and grew even sadder.

"If only the good Lord had sent us a little girl to share our old age;" said the old woman.

They thought on this so strongly that suddenly a miracle happened. They looked at their snow maiden, and were amazed at what they saw. The eyes of the snow maiden twinkled; a diadem studded with precious stones sparkled like fire on her hand; a cape of brocade covered her shoulder; embroidered boots appeared on her feet.

The old couple looked at her and did not believe their eyes. Then the mist of a breath parted the red lips of Snegurochka; she trembled, looked around, and took a step forward.

The old couple stood there, stupefied; they thought they were dreaming. Snegurochka came toward them and said: ***

"Good day, kind folk, do not be frightened! I will be a good daughter to you, the joy of your old age. I will honor you as father and mother."

"My darling daughter, let it be as you desire," answered the old man. "Come home with us, our longed-for little girl!" They took her by her white hands and led her from the forest.

The old couple brought Snegurochka home to their wooden hut, their "isba," and she began her life with them, helping them to do the chores. She was always most respectful, she never contradicted them, and they could not praise her enough, nor tire of gazing at her, she was so kind and so beautiful. (p. 53)

The Russian word, "Snegurochka", means snow maiden. She is dressed like a boyar princess of olden times with a jeweled diadem, beautiful clothing, and elegant boots. Her character seems to have been designed to teach children; by her example of helpfulness, respectability and kindness toward old people. The snow maiden comes out of the desolation of the winter's coldness, both a miracle and a fairy tale princess.

In the summer the natural beauty of the Russian countryside has a fairyland quality: The roadside between Leningrad and Novgorod is dotted with wild flowers. Traveling by train from Kiev to Kishinev you see fields of sunflowers and, here and there, apple trees laden with brilliant red and yellow fruit. There are still forests of birch trees on the outskirts of Leningrad and Moscow.

Stark reality hits you in the grey streets of the cities. They are musty-smelling places as oppressive as poor sections of New York or Chicago. There are many somberly clad people with care-worn faces. The little girls wearing their gossamer hair ribbons provide an ethereal contrast. Russian children are charming creatures!' Many Russian adults sublimate personal freedom and comfront envisioning a better future for their children. Although their life is hard now, it's better than it was in the past.

Although fictional, <u>On Faraway Street</u> illustrates the gentle care and training given modern Russian children. This was a popular book both in Russia and abroad and was made into an equally popular movie. The main character is Seryozha who is tenderly and lovingly instructed by his mother: An excerpt follows:

"...the way his mamma fussed about his saying please." And the word didn't mean anything. "You ask me for a pencil, and to show that it is a request, you add 'please'."

"Without that you wouldn't understand that I was asking you for a pencil?" asked Seryozha.

"I would understand, but without 'please' it is impolite; it isn't good manners. What does it look like when you say, 'Give me a pencil' But if you say, "give me a pencil, please,' that is polite and I give it to you with pleasure." (p. 43)

Korostelov, Seryozha's step-father kindly teaches him to be a man:

But once he fell in the yard and got bloody knees and came into the house crying. Aunt Pasha began to gasp and ran for bandages. Korostelov said, "Don't cry, It'll be over right away. Suppose you go to war and get wounded, what'll you do then."

"And when you were wounded," asked Seryozha, Didn't you cry?"

"How could I cry? My comrades would have laughed at me. We are men, that's our business."

Seryozha stopped crying and said, "Ha, ha, ha!" in order to prove his manhood. And when Aunt Pasha came up to him with the bandage, he said in a daredevil way, "Tie it and don't be afraid! It doesn't hurt!" (p. 47)

Talk of going to war is typically Russian ---war is never very far from their minds. They fear war. Their experience, from Napoleon to the First World War and the civil war and on through the Second World War, has been with military invasion and devastation (Galbraith p. 65).

Russian Children in Real Life

Although the best way to gain knowledge of Russian children is to travel across the Soviet Union, other sources which reveal traditional and modern customs are 19th century writers, fairy tales, and modern party-line stories. After spending three weeks traveling in the U.S.S.R. in 1983, these are some of my observations after talking to people informally.

Russian children enter school at age seven; however many of them already know how to read by that time. The extended family living situations allow the children to have another adult, usually a grand parent, with them while their parents work. Their grandmothers will often have taught them to read using folk and fairy tales. Many children will have been introduced to Tolstoy and Pushkin before they even enter a formal school.

Seven to nine year olds belong to "The Young Octoberists," an organization which encourages them to study, to be honest and truthful and to live happily together. Octoberists wear lapel badges which show Lenin as a boy. Ten to fourteen year olds belong to the Pioneers, an organization which trains them to be politically aware and to become fighters for the Communist cause (White, pp. 301-302).

During summer vacation, many children attend a Pioneer Camp for three weeks. These are similar to Boy Scout and Girl Scout camps in the United States. The major difference is the Pioneers emphasis on political indoctrination. I say this because of observations I was able to make in the summer of 1983:

My most memorable experience with Russian children happened on a visit to a Pioneer Camp several miles south of Kishinev. We drove for miles out in the country on a bus until our arrival at tall wrought iron gates. Young Pioneers, wearing their blue and white uniforms with the red neck scarves, greeted us by presenting bouquets of large red roses, which had been dethorned. We were the first Americans that they had ever seen; we might have been from another planet.

The children accompanied us to the director's office, then sang along the pathway as they left us there. The camp director, a very patriotic war veteran, and his assistant, a slender, graceful, woman of about forty, officially welcomed us. They took us on a tour of their camp.

We were shown a dormitory building of colorful sleeping rooms with rows of little beds. A small square pillow punched into a triangle sat on top of each bed covered in a pastel red, green or blue spread. A few beds had a doll or stuffed animal beside the pillow. Other dolls and toys were on shelves in the entry halls.

One building had an auditorium and classrooms. We wandered into a classroom containing displays of Soviet history and stacks of books.

Two male teachers glared at us and seemed to be waiting for us to leave so they could resume their work. In another room the student council met us and sang an American folk tune in English and one in Russian. A few children who knew a little English approached us wanting to practice the language.

At an open air assembly attended by the whole camp of about 300 children; we sat on the front row. The talented children sang, danced and did little skits which were very pleasant and child-like. However, the last performance was a horrible operetta narrated and sung by the youngest children. It was a story of a happy family visited by Uncle Sam carrying a rocket. The rocket explodes. The mother is killed. It ends with the children's wailing and songs of lament.

After the assembly, we walked to our awaiting bus. This walk was along the Pioneer Camp's Memorial Pathway, a memorial to children who performed heroic deeds for their country. Pictures and signs printed about them line the walkway.

Russians seem to be continually engaged in rememberance of wars and heroes. Honor students aged fourteen to seventeen keep guard at the tombs for the unknown soldiers in most cities. These young guards wear uniforms and march into place to stand at attention at the tomb, changing at fifteen minute intervals. Russian brides come to the tomb directly from their wedding ceremony and lay down their wedding bouquets, solemnly, as a prayer for peace and in the hope that their husbands and sons will never go away to war.

For fun, Russian children living in big cities like Moscow or

or Leningrad go to visit a museum, park or palace of a former tsar or prince. Parks have beautiful flowers, statues and fountains, but walking on the grass is prohibited. I saw no litter in any park. Many beds of red begonias, Peter the Great's favorite flower, are planted in parks and palace gardens. There are few movie theaters but opera and ballet are very popular. Russian television is owned by the government and programing consists of news, sports, and cultural subjects.

City families usually live in concrete block apartment buildings or in older baroque houses, converted into apartments. Children usually walk to school. Many who live in the country between Leningrad and Novogrod, reside in ornately carved nineteenth century peasant houses. These houses are privately owned and have small flower and vegetable gardens adjoining them.

One big difference between Russian cities and our cities is that Russian cities have no advertising; there is no competition because the government owns all stores. Consumer goods are scarce. Shopping involves standing in line for hours to buy the goods and supplies a family needs. On sides of buildings and along highways, where advertising is seen in our country, Russia has larger-than-life paintings of Lenin. Most towns have a street named after Lenin and a park with a statue of Lenin. Lenin medals are awarded to school children for excellence in behavior and academics. Lenin medals are sold for a few kopecs each at news stands all over Russia. Lenin is like a ghost hovering over Russia today.

Summary

Even a brief study of Russian literature makes you aware of a reverence for childhood. In real life this feeling is manifested in families' tender loving treatment of children. Many Russian cultural traits remain constant, in spite of drastic changes in their life style (environment) during the past 150 years. Like an ever present dark shadow, the fear of possible war prevades the lives of modern Russians, including the children. Their fears are reinforced by what they are taught in government educational programs.

Notes: This paper was written as a result of my attendance at the Yale-Hopkins Seminar on Methods of Teaching Russian Affairs at New Haven in the summer of 1982 and in the Soviet Union in the summer of 1983. I wish to thank Jean Morrow of Mandarin, Florida for editing the manuscript.

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